

**Extreme Identities: An examination of extreme sports and the creation of identity within the extreme sports experience.**

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Contents

II. Introduction .....	1
II. A History of Sports .....	2
III. From Recreation to Risk.....	3
IV. The Commercialisation of Extreme Sports .....	5
V. Extreme Sports & Technology.....	6
VI. Extreme Sports & Escapism.....	8
VII. The Person.....	11
VIII. Why do People Participate? .....	13
IX. Extreme Sports Demographic.....	15
<b>X.</b> The Transformative Effect of Extreme Sports.....	19
Bibliography .....	23

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Daniels, E. A. (2012). Sexy versus strong: What girls and women think of female athletes. <i>Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology</i> , 33(2), 79-90.....	24
Dixson, A. D., Chapman, T. K., & Hill, D. A. (2005). Research as an aesthetic process: Extending the portraiture methodology. <i>Qualitative inquiry</i> , 11(1), 16-26.....	24
Donnelly, M. (2006). Studying extreme sports: Beyond the core participants. <i>Journal of Sport and Social Issues</i> , 30(2), 219-224.....	24
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APPENDIX I: Critical Review of Creative Project.....	1



## II. Introduction

Over the past few decades there has been a surge in both the popularity and the number of extreme sports. Extreme sports have many faces. Not only are there a multitude of sports that could be classed as extreme, but there are also a multitude of names for them such as “‘action sports’, ‘whiz sports’, ‘urban sports’, ‘free sports’, ‘lifestyle sports’, ‘alternative sports’ and ‘fringe sports’”([Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013](#), which are all used interchangeably to describe similar activities. For the sake of this essay, the term **extreme sports** will be used to encompass all of the above. Extreme sports can be characterised in a multitude of ways, but most notably by the risk potential that exists and which is rarely found in the more traditional sport. Moreover, it is not just the potential for risk that characterises extreme sports but the inability to remove risk from the sports due to their very nature ([Krein, 2007](#)). Regardless of the clarification used to define the sports in question, the integration of extreme sports into modern society is expanding and in tune with the expression of self-identity, which plays an important role in our world today ([Wheaton, 2004](#)).

This essay and photographic project together, are an examination into the popularisation of extreme sports and the way that identity is both created and has become structurally integral to the development of extreme sports culture. Extreme sports are often seen by it’s participants as not just a sport, but as a lifestyle, and this lifestyle is central to the meaning and the experience of the participants ([Wheaton, 2004](#)).

To complete this study, I networked with extreme sports participants to identify individuals who were willing to participate. The importance in selection lay both in the diversity of the sports and the athletes, thereby allowing me to include a wide range of experiences and level of involvement, to try and match the growing and diverse consumer market.

Ten participants were chosen from a variety of sports:

- water-based sports:

- windsurfing
- kitesurfing
- free diving
- endurance swimming,
- land-based sports:
  - trail-running
  - bodybuilding
  - motor cross,
- aerial sports:
  - paragliding
  - skydiving.

The photographic project was realised through a hybrid of portraiture and participatory practices in an attempt to view the sport from both an external and an internal perspective, thereby creating a bigger picture of the concept of identity within extreme sports.

Throughout this essay, I will refer to both my interactions with the participants during informal recorded interviews at the site of the sporting event, and to the photographs themselves and how they were developed by this research, with the aim of either agreeing, or in some cases challenging, what has previously been documented by other academics. I will also discuss the photographic project as a separate entity in relation to this research and examine its effectiveness and contribution.

## II. A History of Sports

One cannot understand the development of a new form of sporting culture without first delving into its history and that of sports in general. Sports, as we understand them, have been a part of society for thousands of years. Until recently they often served a more functional purpose. An archer would shoot either for food or as defence, people would hike across mountain ranges as the only means of transport from one place to another. Sports were used for survival, military

training, exercise, and physical development ([Alosi, 2007](#)). However, they weren't always an integral part of society as much as they are today. People didn't play sports for recreational "fun". One of the largest contributors to the development of recreational sports was the industrial revolution and the move from rural to urban life. It gave individuals a way to come together and socialise, to work as a team to improve their performance and at the same time it provided an escape from urbanised society ([Alosi, 2007](#)). Society had essentially changed at that time and there were more people yet less interpersonal relationships. The development of recreational sports allowed citizens to socialise with one another and to create friendships through the establishment of voluntary groups and teams.

### III. From Recreation to Risk

As society has changed, so have sports and with these changes more extreme forms of recreation have emerged. The advent and the increase in extreme sports have partly been as a result of technological advances, most notably those associated with aviation — flying and space travel ([Soden 2003](#)). It has increased the potential of human capabilities, allowing us to push the envelope on what could be actualised, to what once would have only been possible through imagination. [Humberstone \(2009\)](#), suggests that globalisation became a huge contributing factor in the popularisation of extreme sports, by "widening, deepening and quickening [...] the worldwide interconnections", allowing for extreme sports participants to seek out more diverse locations that were not previously available.

Additionally, [Robert Fletcher \(2008\)](#) suggests that extreme sports is a "resistance to structural aspects of highly industrialised societies". [Alosi \(2007\)](#), on the other hand feels that extreme sports may have developed as a reaction, not to the advancements in society, but rather as a means to excite the imagination and challenge the otherwise seemingly dull lives of participants. He continues to say that by joining in extreme sports you are not only finding a new hobby but are also being granted access to an entirely new lifestyle.

On the surface it may seem difficult to identify exactly why extreme sports have developed and why they are developing so rapidly. However, there have been strong points made by several academics. [Breivik \(2010\)](#) notes that there is a sense of excitement and of urgency within ex-

treme sports. He believes that it is the holistic experience of extreme sports, that are not solely body based but also mentally stimulating, and the intensity of having to deal with great levels of anxiety and stress and yet still having to perform optimally. This gives them a unique quality that is difficult to find in the more traditional sporting environments. [Humberstone \(2009\)](#) breaks down the experiences of extreme sports further, concluding that there are three main areas from which extreme sports challenge the conventions of traditional sports:

- 1) The need for control,
- 2) A rejection of civilised attitudes, and
- 3) Security and safety.

She states that extreme sports are not “controlled in the same way as mainstream sports are by organizational frameworks, strict rules and regulated competitions in clearly defined environments” (Humberstone, 2009) and that this rule-less and routine-less construction within extreme sports resonates with those who feel disenfranchised or neglected or misrepresented by elements of modern day society. with . An argument can also be made that extreme sports are seen to challenge the ideas of sportsmanship and the idea of a civil participant, who must behave in a certain way, and adhere to a certain code of conduct. This allows the participants of extreme sports more room for individual expression when realising their identities within their sports.

It re-introduces the Darwinian element of survival of the fittest and the reconstruction of competition, removing itself from a man-made prize to the ultimate prize of survival and the ultimate price of not succeeding ([Humberstone, 2009](#)).

Finally, the rejection of security in extreme sports can be correlated to the increasing need for personal security in everyday life, from security guarded complexes to CCTV surveillance and the inability to walk the streets at night, which creates an environment where safety becomes a main concern and risk becomes increasingly dangerous. Extreme sports can be an outlet to allow people to experience risk and place themselves in a potentially dangerous situation voluntarily and that is usually avoided at all costs within our modern society.

But how do you know when a sport goes from being conventional to extreme and what is that tipping point? [Michael Alosi \(2007\)](#) comments that “some play sports for exercise, some to

make friends. Some seek fame and fortune through sport, while others simply want a break from the pressure of everyday life” and it is this complexity of motivation that can make the act hard to define, with the term “‘Extreme sports’ [becoming] a universal descriptor for a multitude of nontraditional independent and organized adventure sports.” ([Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013](#)).

According to [Grossman \(2012\)](#) “there are no officially defined limitations or boundaries as to what makes one activity an action sport and another one not.” However, he does conclude that “action sports can be identified by their progressive nature. There is often with no clear-cut finish line; rarely can you judge winning or losing beyond pure subjectivity” ([Grossman, 2012](#)). Other theorists take a more literal approach, such as [Fletcher \(2008\)](#), who identifies extreme sports as sports that increase the chances of debilitating injury or fatality.

#### **IV. The Commercialisation of Extreme Sports**

The increase in the popularity of extreme sports and its ability to traverse multiple industries has become cemented into everyday life, proving that it “is not just a ‘flash in the pan’ but rather a sign of the times” ([Puchan, 2004](#)). There has been particular popularity amongst the younger millennial and Generation Y cultures. [Bennett & Lachowetz \(2004\)](#) attribute this to the marketing teams of “companies and advertisers [who] are more likely to use teens riding skateboards promote products than traditional athletes like baseball or football players.” ([Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004](#)) Extreme sports are being given more airtime and more importantly, advertising time, than they have in the past, with each advert not only advertising a product but a lifestyle. This popularisation has also spread into other areas of life outside of recreational activity, including “apparel lines, video games, movies and documentaries, events and concert tours” ([Bennet & Lachowetz, 2004](#)). Furthermore, extreme sports have also become a commodity within the tourism industry, which until recently had gained little media attention ([Bourdeau, Corneloup & Mao, 2002](#)).

## V. Extreme Sports & Technology

Wearable technology and in particular wearable cameras have become increasingly more advanced and user-friendly, which in turn has led to an increased popularity within the adventure lifestyle communities. Wearable cameras such as GoPro's and other 'action cams' have become increasingly popular with the following objectives:

- to record thrilling and unexpected scenarios,
- to record what the camera sees during an unusual, dangerous or high-risk activity, and
- to record either, from the user's perspective, or the user themselves. ([Chalfen, 2014](#)).

What he calls 'wearable technology' has become somewhat of a game changer with the added ability for extreme sports athletes and companies to capture their desired sports. He has noted that in the last 10-15 years there has been a dramatic increase in the popularity and availability of small wearable cameras that are made specifically for extreme sports use ([Chalfen, 2014](#)).

The most notable of these camera manufacturers is GoPro. GoPro's picture quality, coupled with its small size, weight and durability in almost all conditions, has led to it becoming the "number one best-selling camera in the world" ([Chalfen, 2014](#)). By capturing a scene through the eyes of the athlete, you are effectively allowing the viewer to place themselves in their protagonists' shoes, living vicariously through them and potentially being inspired by them. [Humberstone \(2009\)](#) contributes to the conversation surrounding the integration of photography and videography into extreme sports by remarking that photography and videography facilitates the capacity for extreme sports athletes to both document their performance and for these documents be used as a tool for further learning and to help establish and to maintain the extreme sports culture and identity. In addition, she also mentions the importance of the media when discussing the popularisation of cameras and wearable technology, stating that it the distribution of these images within traditional news formats and within online formats, have contributed to this development of a new extreme sport subculture.

The integration of a self-shot video into the extreme sports culture was the motivation for the final photograph of each of the participants in this research project and is influenced by the opinions and findings of [Wheaton and Beal \(2003\)](#). The "legitimate or authentic discourses of the sports are centred on action photos of people 'doing it' and their associated lifestyles and

social worlds.”([Wheaton and Beal, 2003](#)) It therefore became evident to me that part of the creation of the subculture to which my participants belong, comes from their ability to contribute to this by sharing their experiences and perspectives through their own eyes. The secondary aim of this inclusion was to test the ability and translatability of the image itself, to test whether the audiences of the images are able to either relate to, or be inspired by, what they see without necessarily being a part of the photographers’ subculture and additionally, whether they are able to gain any perspective about these athletes’ experiences through the inclusion of the photographs that would otherwise not be translated.

Furthermore, by handing over the responsibility of self-representation to the subjects it allows the athletes to become their own curator in the depiction of both themselves and their sport. It gives them the power to choose what their audiences see and how they wish to be perceived.

As mentioned previously, the stereotype of the adrenaline junkie with a death wish, is one that all of my participants had experienced and by giving them control, I was attempting to allow them to take control over that stereotype, enabling them to represent their sports in a highly personalised way with their own unique experience and to shed further light on what their experiences are actually like.

The technological advances within extreme sports have not only developed because of photographic and camera advances, but also as a result of improvements in sporting equipment and apparel. This poses an interesting dynamic within extreme sports. As stated earlier, extreme sports arguably developed as a reaction to an overly safe modern society and to escape a modern industrial society obsessed with safety ([Humberstone, 2009](#)). However, as these sports grow in popularity, and its participants diversify, the equipment continues to develop and becomes safer and more user-friendly. Furthermore, with these advances, some of what may have traditionally been considered extreme sports, such as surfing or snowboarding, are now more in line with what are generally considered as common sports, with sports such as base jumping, skydiving and free diving becoming the extreme. It would seem that the contemporary sports culture has seen the emergence of new cutting edge adventure sports which push the boundaries of risk and increase the chances of fatal injuries([Palmer, 2004](#)). However, with this increase in risk also comes an advancement in technology to help safeguard against the potential risk associated with adventure (Lynch & Moore, 2004). Therefore, it is suggested that the popularisation of extreme sports could be, in part, due to a reduced risk factor that still allows people to ‘feel

the rush' and share in the experience, albeit with a limited risk of death. ([Humberstone, 2009](#)) also attributes the popularisation of extreme sports to increased safety. She argues that the commercialisation of these sports, notably through tourism and leisure tours or extreme sports package holidays, makes it possible to experience the "thrills and excitement without a long learning process" ([Humberstone, 2009](#)) , but that although this leads to a safer experience, it may perhaps be less fulfilling.

In my own research, Rein, a big wave surfer and skydiver, highlighted the correlation between the increase in risk-preventing technology and the increase in the sports' popularity. Where big wave surfers used to have to be able to hold their breath for minutes at a time to prevent themselves from drowning, there are now new devices that inflate like buoyancy aids, allowing any submerged surfers to be taken to the surface in a matter of seconds. Interestingly, Rein notes this 'lack of risk' as one of the reasons that he has moved away from big wave surfing in recent years, as he finds the use of technology tends to 'take away from the spirit of the sport' and also allows inexperienced surfers to put themselves in potentially harmful situations.

However, not every participant sees the advancements as negative. Tim, a paraglider instructor, says that the continual development and the focus on safety within paragliding contributes to its thriving industry and he says that by allowing others access to paragliding, it generates a larger industry, creating more jobs and in general, giving the sport a more positive image. However, there are still challenges within the sport; because he participates in endurance flying competitions, he feels that there is still an element of risk and although this can be dangerous for those that push the boundaries, increased safety is just allowing more people to access the other end of that scale.

## **VI. Extreme Sports & Escapism**

Extreme sports have undoubtedly become more popular in the last thirty years. It could be argued that in the same way that recreational sports were a reaction to the industrial revolution and city living, extreme sports are a continuation of the increasing need to escape consumer life.

Escapism became a key topic of conversation with many of the research participants. Tim, a paraglider and owner of a paragliding company, reiterated the meditative effect that paragliding has on him, an observation similar to other participants such as Malin, Petra and Nina.

He says that the concentration required during the activity occupies his mind completely and consequently he can let go of the day-to-day stresses or anxieties and focus on being in the moment. He continued by saying that this then allows both his body and mind to relax, putting him in a better and more reflective place to tackle his issues when his feet hit the ground.

Through my own research and feedback from athletes and by looking into the research of others, whilst enlightening in many ways, the feedback often offers no clear or tangible evidence as to why they have chosen to participate. The reason for taking part in such sports is seemingly inexplicable, with participants stating that the experience can only be fully understood through actual participation ([Lyng, 1990](#)). The act of risk taking is therefore more experiential than can be physically explained, which could be seen to create a divide between those who are 'in the know' and those who aren't. In my own research, this became a recurring theme with most, if not all participants, explaining that their experience is not something you can compare to anything else; that it is something unique to their sport and in a way, unique to them. The experience that people have when taking part in extreme sports goes beyond that of a superficial enjoyment or recreational experience and rather translates into something much deeper and more meaningful – “they are beyond words, and leave a person mystified” ([Allman, et. al, 2009](#)).

There has been a notable increase in the “incorporation of an iconography of risk-taking behaviour into a whole range of popular cultural products”([Palmer, 2004](#)), whether it be through advertising, film or magazine. The visibility of extreme sports has surpassed the realm of a well-advertised commodity and through this visibility, extreme sports has become a culture or a lifestyle that represents freedom for many.

Academics such as [Camorrino \(2018\)](#), have stated that there is a correlation between the popularisation of the extreme sports lifestyle and the growing popularity of 'green spirituality'. As most extreme sports take place outdoors and in nature, the participant is often reliant on the

natural world for their 'adventure playground' and this dependence on the natural world can be argued to strengthen the bond between these two cultures, "integrating them into a sort of green eschatology" ([Camorrino, 2018](#)). The natural environment offers the extreme sports participants an arena, "an obstacle for conquering, or a playground for exhilaration and natural highs" ([Brymer & Gray, 2009](#)).

However, the relationship between the athlete and their environment runs deeper than that and by simplifying the connection between the two sides as that of conqueror and conquered may in fact reflect more of "how a naïve non-participant of extreme sports or even a novice practitioner understands the relationship as opposed to an inherent element of the extreme sport experience" ([Brymer & Gray, 2009](#)). This relationship between the two creates a deeper understanding of the natural world, and can be seen to generate 'a positive change' in the athlete's understanding of the natural world ([Brymer, Downey & Gray, 2009](#)). Therefore, by viewing oneself alongside the natural world, you may be able to find your place within it.

[Page \(2003\)](#), reflects on the experience that takes place within big wave surfing. Whilst the wave would become important to the rider, the rider was not important to the wave, nor played any effect on it. This experience could be seen as humbling and allows the athlete to recognise the power that the natural world has over their sport. This is an opinion that came up persistently within my research. Many of the participants equated their experience to being able to be out in nature and being one with nature. For example, when speaking with Ant, one of his all-time achievements within freediving was not his record-holding positions, but rather, an experience that he had in which he followed a sea turtle for several minutes during a breath-hold dive. He commented that this experience was like no other he had ever had and that it made him feel like he was accepted by and was at one with nature. Ant's understanding of the natural world has also been documented by other research, notably [Brymer & Gray \(2009\)](#), when discussing their research participants, they state that participants discussed the extreme sport experience as "learning to adapt to, participating with, or being attuned to the natural world as in a partnership or 'dance'".

The relationship that an athlete forms with the natural world could be considered unique, as they are really faced with the grandness of the natural world, with some even arguing that "if this trajectory of growing awareness is typical, outdoor educators may find allies in the extreme sport community rather than philosophical adversaries" ([Brymer & Gray, 2009](#)) and it may be a safe prediction that there will be more green and ecological versions of adventure sports in the future ([Humberstone, 2009](#)).

## VII. The Person

Extreme sports athletes, both professional and vocational, are often viewed in different ways:

- As societal deviants ([Elmes & Barry, 1999](#))
- People who idolise the independence and risk of extreme activities ([Bennett, Henson & Zhang, 2003](#))
- "Crazy people taking unnecessary risks, having 'no fear' or holding onto a death wish" ([Brymer & Oades, 2008](#)).

Traditionally, those who participated in these sports were typecast as "young people with abnormal characteristics or personalities having unhealthy and pathological tendencies to take risks because of the need for thrill, excitement or an adrenaline 'rush'" ([Immonen et. al, 2017](#)) and such views would commonly cement the stereotypes of extreme sports participants within the same categories as illicit drug takers and deviant social groups ([Holmbom et. al, 2017](#)).

For much of the twentieth century, extreme sports participants were assumed to have "an unhealthy relationship to fear" ([Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013](#)). However, this view of extreme sports athletes has begun to change, with many starting to examine not only the negative effects of what some would consider high-risk activities, but also the positive attributes that extreme situations can have upon human beings. It could be argued that the shift is away from the risk of the activity towards the human element of extreme sports. However, it can also be argued that the creation of identities is somewhat paradoxical due to the consumerist nature of the sports, heavily reliant on emerging markets and branding for identity. This becomes even more problematic when looking at large sponsors of extreme sports such as Red Bull, which have a brand image of "speed, power, and recklessness" ([Brasel & Gips, 2011](#)). This seems to reflect a differ-

ent identity to that of the participants in this study and what they are creating. Furthermore, when looking at Strauss's arguments of "Mirrors & Masks", the association with brands such as Red Bull, despite the difference that it may create within your own image could be a result of embracing and owning the 'anticipated [...] judgements' of others ([Strauss, 1997](#)).

Photography has previously been described as a useful tool for creating and communicating an individual's identity (Dijck, 2008) and the humanness of the participants was an important element in this project. A standard portrait is utilised to try and create a sense of the person involved and simultaneously to highlight the 'normality' of the person. When removed from the context of their sport the participant can be seen as a person and not an athlete and is also given their own face. I wanted to challenge the conventions that are set out within this thesis and attempt to bridge the gap between the scientific and artistic representations of reality and not only produce distorted characters. Without being able to view these people as they are, it can be easy to jump to conclusions and view them from a sterile scientific perspective. The portraiture is an attempt to contextualise them as unique individuals and in turn disregard the idea that the researcher is the figure of authority who is all knowing and understanding of the lives of their participants. By giving them a face, we are able to see the variety, or lack thereof, in the participants and allow them to show and express themselves and if they so desired to reshape their public identity 'face to face' ([Van Dijck, 2008](#)).

## VIII. Why do People Participate?

There have been many suggestions as to why people participate in extreme sports, with some approaching the subject in terms of a dissection of culture and others using a more psychological examination. Whilst there have been no clear-cut and definitive answers to these questions, there have been many who have put forward strong arguments. Donnelly, for example, noted in her 2006 article that snowboarding could be an example of 'generational conflict' with the young participants using the sport "to differentiate themselves from their parents and their parents' sport" ([Donnelly, 2006](#)). [Thorpe and Wheaton \(2011\)](#) also acknowledge that whilst each individual sport has its own identity and culture, there is an overarching undertone of 'anti-establishment' and individualism in extreme sports.

In my own research, Rein who is both a skydiver and a big wave surfer drew the most comparisons to this personality type. In discussion with him, he remarked that the reason that he enjoys big wave surfing and skydiving is that both sports remove him from the 'real world', which could be seen to profile him alongside the 'anti-establishment' narrative that [Thorpe and Wheaton \(2011\)](#) suggest. Additionally, when participating in both sports he is not only 'alone' and solely responsible for the outcome of his actions, but he also feels a sense of strength and self-belief, which could be seen as a form of individualism. It is however interesting that he is one of the most socially connected individuals in his sports and he also participates in skydiving, along with his partner Marlin, who was also a volunteer in this project. This in turn could reveal that whilst the act alone could be an attempt to find 'alone space' and to express his independence and a rejection of society at large, he is still able to create meaningful relationships and enjoy sharing his unique experiences with like-minded others.

There is research linking adventure sports athletes and participants to the 'Type T' personality type. They will typically elicit more 'thrill-seeking or risk-taking' tendencies than the other personality types. ([Self et al., 2006](#)). Therefore, extreme sports could be seen as an outlet for these particular personality types, allowing them the freedom to perform high-risk activities in a controlled and somewhat socially accepted way. However, with the increase in these sports, it could also be argued that a case could be made that this personality type is either becoming more acceptable, or further glamorised, leading to a new breed of athlete.

[Kusz \(2004\)](#) suggests that extreme sports could be viewed as a reclamation of the traditional outdoorsman American values, with an emphasis on the rugged individualism, being able to conquer new frontiers and achieving individual progress as the key components. This suggestion differs to the [Self et.al \(2006\)](#) argument that it is not just a result of personality types, but also a desire to regain an identity in a world where it has been deconstructed. It would be hard to imagine new geological frontiers and rugged individualism in a world so overpopulated and exploring a world that is largely reliant on technology and infrastructure for survival.

Therefore, whilst the output has changed, this “risk-taking” could be a way of reconstructing the male identity.

The problem with the above idea is that, whilst it may be applied to male athletes who make up the majority of extreme sports athletes, it does not take into consideration the female identity within extreme sports and the reasons why they participate. The representation of women in sport in general has always been somewhat troublesome, with women often being overlooked or not being allowed the same kind of access to sports as men and moreover, white men. “Because of the historical association of sport with masculinity, women’s entrance onto the “playing fields” has the potential to challenge dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity” ([Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008](#)). It is easy to forget that before the 1970s and the second-wave feminist movement, women were almost completely excluded from any technical courses and were significantly underrepresented in high school sports, let alone being able to participate in sport and considered as dominant members within the sporting culture ([Lopiano, 2000](#)). However, since the legal inclusion of women through breakthroughs such as the 1972 Title IX and preventing discrimination within sport based on gender, women have become increasingly involved in sport. Through their success, women have challenged the concept of how an athlete should look and more specifically, the highly regarded male athlete stereotypes.

The challenge of masculinity in sports can be seen with the inclusion of women into the sport narrative, from the broadcasting of female sporting competitions to the popularity of films like *Bend it Like Beckham*. This increasing representation of women in sports and the showcasing and celebration of female achievements has led to the development of female sporting brands and female based sporting equipment. Women have become a fast-growing consumer market within the sports industry with 55 million women now participating in sport ([Lopiano, 2000](#)).

Furthermore, he states that with extreme sports, women's introduction into sport has been much more varied than that of men in America, who have historically been pressured into participating in more traditional team sports. This may suggest that without these constraints, women have been given greater freedom to choose sports and may even be seeking out this freedom.

In the current research, this was highlighted by Petra, a competitive windsurfer and kitesurfer. She stated that over the last twenty years, equipment such as wetsuits, boards and kites has changed dramatically. and that with these advances, the equipment has become easier for women to use and is now being designed and manufactured with the female shape in mind, along with aesthetic choices that identify with femininity. This suggests that women are now being taken seriously as consumers of extreme sports and sports brands.

Karo, a professional windsurfer and windsurfing ambassador, also recognised a large influx of women to the sport. She noted that the exposure that women are now getting in the windsurfing world and communities at large, is creating an awareness that inspires other women to join the sport, which then proves to other women that these types of sporting activities are not limited to men. Like Petra, she noted that the advances in both female-centric sporting technology and more feminine stylistic choices, also play a role in increasing the number of women who are participating in sport and allows accessibility to the sport for those who are starting out. However, even with more female-centric technology and more female participants, the media representation of women in sport can still be viewed as disparate, with female participants still being treated differently when compared to male athletes ([Fink, 2015](#)) and when they are shown, they are often sexualized, valuing their body over the achievement ([Daniels, 2012](#)). This clearly illustrates that whilst there has been progress, there are still many improvements that can be made to tackle gender discrimination in extreme sports.

## **IX. Extreme Sports Demographic**

Age is often a common similarity within extreme sports athletes, and arguably most sports athletes. Many of the participants in extreme sports activities are young and within the millennial and Generation Y bracket. Whilst the physical demands that these kinds of sports require are evident, many have also attributed the popularity of extreme sports with the younger genera-

tions as a cultural expression. [Bennett & Lachowetz \(2004\)](#) comment on this cultural attraction to extreme sport as it speaks to the youth; part of their demographic elements such as “creativity, individuality, friendship/camaraderie (even within a competitive setting), and a style that can only be developed when not constrained by teams and rules found in traditional sports like football, baseball and basketball” ([Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004](#)).

This is highlighted in the current research and visual project. Of all the participants, only two were over the age of 40, Ant the free diver and Petra the windsurfer. The youngest participant of the project, Sebastian who was ultimately not included in the photographic project due to time constraints, was 20 years old and the age range of the remaining participants was 25-35 years old. When discussing the approach to their sports, it was interesting that the younger participants had mostly been participating in their sports since childhood, whilst the older participants only came into the sport later in life. Whilst their ages were different, the time participating in the sport was largely the same.

Another element which became evident during the research, was the element of financial stability. This association between class and/or economic stability and extreme sports is not new. Donnelly (2006) stated in her article that from the outset snowboarders have generally been middle- to upper-middle-class youth who have the financial means to buy expensive snowboarding equipment and gear and to pay for the logistics associated with the sport. Access to equipment and training areas can become a costly expense for extreme sports athletes and therefore, can often be identified with elitism and traditionally associated with “young, white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual males” ([Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011](#)). Of course, within many Western Societies, and developing societies, such as South Africa, class is often related to racial discrimination. Even though there has been an increase in the examination of minorities in extreme sports, notably females and their under representation, very little seems to have been written specifically, and exclusively, about the role that race plays within extreme sports cultures and identities ([Pelak, 2005](#)). Furthermore, the ingrained rhetoric of the association of ‘whiteness’ and the upper-class within sports, has in itself lead to the media generally making ‘normative assumptions’ of their target demographic, making it increasingly complicated for female and non-white participants to integrate themselves into the extreme sports subculture ([Wheaton & Beal, 2003](#)).

In this study, all participants were white. However, due to the organic nature of the research it may be difficult to define whether this was entirely due to the selection of participants or whether it is a result of racial discrimination, for whatever reason, within extreme sports. Participants were recommended by those already in the study with the exception of Malin, Nic and Tim who were the initial contacts. This was due to my lack of connections within the extreme sports subculture, but it did illustrate the understanding of the interconnected culture and identity of extreme sports and tested the limit as to how far the variety of athletes would spread. With this being said, when discussing race with all of the participants, there was an overwhelming response that there was a disparity between white participants and participants of any other ethnic background, but that this gap is narrowing and that there do seem to be more people of colour gaining access to extreme sports, notably due to grassroots organisations and the growing ethnically diverse middle-class within South Africa, granting people the money and opportunity to invest in extreme sports.

In Wheaton's studies into windsurfing, which she documented in 2004, she notes that whilst participants were aware of their standing within certain societal groups, i.e, gender, class, race, they would often see themselves first and foremost as a windsurfer, with the other societal groupings coming in second to the sport itself. This suggests that despite media bias and cultural representation of extreme sports, 'non-normative' athletes were still able to construct their identities and find their positioning within the subculture of extreme sports. With this being said, it does not indicate that there isn't a need for greater inclusion. Whilst the economic standing, gender or racial profile of extreme sports participants may not actively prevent them from establishing their own unique identities and subcultures within extreme sports, there are factors such as expense, location, time and commitment that effectively exclude less-privileged participants ([Wheaton, 2004](#)).

This speaks to the ability of extreme sports athletes to both strive to be a part of and create a community where people are able to find inclusion despite bias. [Donnelley and Young \(1988\)](#) remark on the social experiences within sports as being in part a process of identity formation with the adoption of mannerisms, attitudes, dress style, speech and behaviour. Extreme sports athletes therefore begin to establish themselves within their new subculture.

One can deduce that these aspects of identity creation are an important aspect of these subcultures and of sport identities, although some may be construed as a part of consumerism, a notion which is often associated with some of the negative aspects of extreme sports.

## X. The Transformative Effect of Extreme Sports

Whilst the traditional extreme sports narrative of a crazy daredevil still exists within many people's mindsets; this is being challenged by a range of psychologists and sociologists. Many are now suggesting that adventure sports or extreme sports can have greater positive transformational benefits than first realised ([Brymer & Oades, 2008](#)). [Immonen et al. \(2017\)](#) elaborate by saying that extreme sports can be thought of as activities that expand and evolve through the exploration of new experiences that go beyond the fixed physical, environmental, psychological and socio-cultural boundaries.

"The most commonly associated emotion with extreme sports is fear which in turn is one of the great unmentionable aspects to being human" ([Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013](#)).

When discussing with the participant's the presence of "fear" within their sports, there were many common unifiers that tied together the participant's responses. Whilst all participants take part in sports that many people may be fearful of, nearly all noted that others thought that their relationship to these sports correlated with "an unhealthy relationship to fear or [that] they must be pathologically fearless" ([Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013](#)). [Self et al. \(2006\)](#) talks about the correlation between type T personalities, commonly recognised as thrill seekers and the use of extreme sports as a positive physical outlet for these tendencies. However, these extreme actions may also be construed as a form of deviance.

Many of the participants in the current study such as Marlin, Nina, Ant and Tim, recall that they were seen as being 'crazy' for their participation in their respective sports and are commonly described as 'adrenaline junkies'. However, to them, the 'emotional high' they get has little to do with the physical act of the sport but rather the mental confrontation between fear and achievement. Many extreme athletes embrace the emotion of fear, rather than allowing it to over rule their ambitions they continue despite these challenging emotions. In doing so, they get a better understanding of their limitations and sense of self-worth and identity ([Brymer & Schweitzer 2013](#)). Fear creates emotional barriers which are often caused by the risk of the action and by tackling the presence of fear, you are able to take part in experiences that you never would have been able to previously (Frijda, 1988).

Interestingly, Marlin, who is a skydiver and a stunt artist, said that no matter how many times she skydives, jumping from the plane door is always a battle of wills against instinct. It is a complete mind game and that the reason that she can force herself to jump is because of the release she gets by harnessing her fear and allowing herself to trust her judgement and her equipment. [Brymer and Schwitzer \(2013\)](#) confirm a similar reaction from their study participants, concluding that they identified fear, not as a negative experience but as something to embrace. Their participants identified “that “fear is a friend” and once the ability to recognise and invited a relationship with fear is learnt, fear can be experienced as transformational” ([Brymer and Schwitzer, 2013](#)).

Extreme sports pose challenges that are specifically unique to their sub-genre and it is through these unique challenges that many of the participants are able to push themselves to their absolute limits and in most cases, try to discover what that limit is ([Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013](#)). In addition, the often over exaggerated reaction to what could be deemed as risk taking and the negation of the human ability to problem solve could be suggested to create a “culture of fear” ([Breivik, 2010](#)) which in turn leads to more constraints and implementation of control. The risk takers are made out to be illogical and whilst there is sense in the need for control within our developing society, there is still a part of us that has an inner element that is untamed and “that is not content with security and full control.” ([Breivik, 2010](#)).

The idea of acceptance and embracing of risk aligns with this research, as when speaking to Marlin, a skydiver and stunt artist, she states,

‘To me, it isn’t a risk. I know that if I pull the right handle at the right time, I will be fine. I guess it is a risk but for me, it is calculated. [...] I am giving myself control over the situation and trusting myself to be able to confront any problem’ - *Marlin, 2018*.

The highly personalised experience of overcoming individual challenges and goals was an aspect that I wanted to emphasise in the visual work. However, as I had not personally overcome or harnessed my fear in the same way as the participants, I wanted to show the sport from their perspective and to demonstrate their experience of overcoming fear. This was something we

spoke about when choosing the GoPro footage to accompany their portraits.

## XI. Conclusion

Extreme sports is a rapidly growing industry, both in terms of a commercial market and its popularity and image in the media sector and modern society. There are transformative effects from both the physical and mental challenges that the participants face and these endeavours promote the ideals of individualism and self-realisation.

There is an increasingly accessible market due to improved safety and advances in technology, with the chances of being close to nature in remote areas that were not previously attainable.

Although there has been an increase in diversity with greater inclusion of marginalised groups and individuals, there is still room for progress. Some of these restraints may, however, be linked to economics, which will likely impact inclusivity of particular socio-economic groups in the future, as extreme sports are often associated with high cost.

Extreme sports have grown out of the opposition to traditional sports and the rules and regulations that confine them offering a new avenue for self-discovery and high-risk decision making. Participants in this study into extreme sports come from varied backgrounds and take part in a diverse range of sports. However, there are common themes that prevail:

- The harnessing of fear,
- finding tranquility,
- creating a deeper relationship with the natural world,
- and exploration of self.

The popularity of extreme sports is allowing the experience it generates to reach wider audiences and creating more than just sports, but a lifestyle and culture. It could be predicted that their popularity will continue to grow, with each sport developing its appeal and adapting to find new ways to generate risk; for example, wingsuit flying / base-jumping, arguably a more dangerous variant of paragliding with a growing audience. As extreme sports become more

commercialised and in turn, safer, one could argue that there will be new sports emerging, with the risks becoming greater and the skills required to participate becoming more demanding. Additionally, the audiences and participants of these sports will continue to grow. Extreme sports is becoming more accessible to a wider age range due to its accessibility and the safeguarding of the sports themselves with both older and younger participants emerging, which will hopefully lead to greater diversity in the sports for the years to come.

Furthermore, the availability and accessibility of said sports could lead to a greater variety of classes being given access, allowing people from lower income backgrounds to become involved in these sports in a similar way to the grassroots movement within other sports such as soccer and surfing. Lastly, as environmental conservation becomes increasingly important, and popular within modern rhetoric, the emphasis on environmentally friendly and sustainable extreme sports could be set to increase with more people taking part in these sports as a way of connecting with nature, and therefore, creating a stronger sense of responsibility for their “playground”.

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## APPENDIX I: Critical Review of Creative Project

Due to the nature of a project that takes place over a long time, there are often elements that must change or that are made redundant as the project develops. As mentioned previously, the original concept for this project was simpler and more one-sided than the one that you are presented with today. The original concept was to document an extreme sports participant before the sport took place and afterwards could still create a visually compelling art series. However, whilst researching for this project and through my interactions with the participants I became increasingly aware that the actually physical effects, the “adrenaline rush” or the “high” that they experienced from their participation seemed much more lightly weighted than the more spiritual benefits that they gained such as a sense of identity and self, their connection to the environment and the ability to trust in one’s own actions.

It became evident to me that, as someone who takes part in sports that are on the fringe of the extreme sports culture, but that “don’t quite make the grade”, I did not want to speak for these participants but would rather approach the project differently, with our discussions in mind and to create a more collaborative project that showcased both my experience meeting them as an ‘outsider’ and their experience of extreme sports as someone who is personally informed.

The execution of the project was possibly naïve, as for me to really get an understanding of these cultures I would have to spend far more time with each participant, over a longer period of time and realistically I could generate 10 photographs of each participant at least. However, I feel that the overall sense of purpose from the creative project still stands.

Fundamentally it is to be broken down into its four sections:

- a) The person and their sport
- b) The person as an individual
- c) The sport from their perspective, and
- d) The way that they visualise themselves within their sport.

From this perspective I feel that the project is a successful initial step to develop a much larger study and piece of creative work.